

Reaching New Heights: Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

National Governors Association 2002-2003 Chairman's Initiative



America's children are our nation's future; and without a proper education, that future is threatened. Since the mid-1980s, governors and other state policymakers have committed themselves to the long and arduous task of school reform. While this reform movement has had many successes—in states like Kentucky, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Texas, for example—a number of challenges remain. Perhaps the greatest challenge is the large number of consistently low-performing schools that are failing our children, literally and figuratively, in cities and states around the nation.

Governors are constantly searching for solutions that will help all schools succeed, but some schools require more help than others. The long-term goal for states is to improve overall system performance while closing persistent gaps in achievement between minority and non-minority students. Fortunately, there are places to look for guidance. Although some schools continue to struggle, some have responded successfully to state reform efforts and others have gone far in improving student performance and closing the achievement gap. Current research also suggests there are ways state policies can effectively stimulate and support school improvement.

Governors must lead the charge to provide all students with an equal opportunity to learn and succeed. During the next year, NGA's Center for Best Practices, with support from the Broad Foundation, will work with governors to identify strategies their states can take to turn around low-performing schools, helping to ensure a brighter future for all of America's children.

Kentucky Governor Paul Patton
NGA Chairman, 2002-2003



The Problem: What We Know

Based on recent studies, low-performing schools suffer from several distinct problems:

- **Low expectations for students**—some educators and district leaders subscribe to the belief that low-income, limited English-speaking, and minority children cannot be taught to high standards. The result is schools with weak “internal accountability” systems around teaching and student learning and a culture where poor performance is blamed on children.
- **Low-quality teaching**—low-performing schools are more likely to be filled with weak teachers who are inexperienced and lack expertise in literacy, math, or more specialized subject areas.
- **Lack of instructional leadership**—few principals in low-performing schools have the knowledge and skills needed to foster instructional improvement.
- **Ineffective use of resources**—although low-performing schools and districts often receive significant infusions of financial and human resources, including professional development, they rarely use these resources in ways that lead to instructional improvement and increased student achievement.



Reaching New Heights: Strategies for Success



Despite the urgency and magnitude of the problem, there are few clear-cut solutions for turning around low-performing schools. Currently, 33 states provide assistance to low-performing schools, 30 states rate school performance, 17 states include report cards with disaggregated data, 20 states provide rewards to schools that meet performance targets, and 20 states impose sanctions on schools that fail to meet performance targets. NGA will focus on helping states and governors understand and identify essential strategies for turning around low-performing schools in three key areas:

I. Improving teaching in low-performing schools

How can states improve overall teacher quality in low-performing schools and enhance the work of current teachers in these schools through high-quality professional development?

Excellent schools require a highly skilled teaching workforce to improve student learning. Yet low-performing schools have the greatest difficulty recruiting and retaining highly



skilled teachers. **2. Building the instructional leadership capacity of school administrators**

How can state and district partners rethink school leadership policies so that greater numbers of instructional leaders can be developed for low-performing schools and given the tools to succeed once in these schools?

School leaders protect teachers' time for instruction and professional growth; link teachers to external professional learning opportunities; and provide support, mentoring, and supervision to improve instructional skills. Few practicing principals or those entering the profession have these leadership skills. Most state and district policies are not supportive of the practice of instructional leadership at the school level.

3. Developing accountability systems that support school improvement

How can states collaborate with districts in refining accountability systems to better support the scaling-up of school improvement strategies and help develop the capacity of districts and schools to address persistent performance gaps?

States have extensive experience in the last decade developing and implementing accountability systems. Yet, while many states have developed rewards and sanctions for performance, these have not led to significant improvement in the weakest-performing schools.

NGA Chairman's Initiative: The Path to Success

There is no one, credible source of information that governors can turn to for information about what has worked and what hasn't, in terms of the merits of various strategies, summaries of research findings, or recommendations for possible policy actions. There is also a need to document success stories that not only show that it is possible for schools to rebound, but also suggest the conditions that need to be in place in states, districts, and schools for others to follow similar, successful paths. By sharing what has worked across the nation, governors can learn from each other as they tackle the difficult task of turning around their low-performing schools. Governor Patton will appoint a task force of governors to lead his initiative. The NGA Chairman's Initiative will provide:

A Series of Framing Papers

These briefs will summarize and widen the knowledge base on current intervention strategies for low-performing schools.

A Guidebook for Governors

The guidebook will provide both a policy framework and highlight best practices from states, districts, and other nations. The framework will be created in collaboration with national and state experts and focus on the three areas highlighted in the initiative. The guidebook will be released at NGA's 2003 Winter Meeting and will serve as a timely tool for governors as they begin to fully implement the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA).



An Institute for Governors' Education Advisors

The institute will provide an opportunity to convene governors' advisors and education leaders to study best practices and identify how those practices can be implemented in their own states. Institute participants also will be briefed on current research and discuss the implications of these findings for state policy.

A National Education Summit for Governors

The summit will take place at NGA's 95th Annual Meeting, August 16–19, 2003, in Indianapolis, Indiana. The summit will raise national awareness on strategies developed to turn around low-performing schools.

Design Partnerships in Five States

At the end of the Chairman's Initiative, NGA will select five states to work with more intensively to create policies that will help turn around their low-performing schools. States who wish to participate will be required to develop a comprehensive, collaborative "design partnership" with at least one large school district in their state. Each state design partnership team will work with a "faculty," composed of NGA staff and outside experts, who will lead the team through an examination of policy options in such areas as professional development, principal and teacher quality, and school accountability.



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Preparing America's Children to Learn

A National Governors Association Task Force on School Readiness

"The education of America's children begins the day they are born, not their first day in a classroom."

-Kentucky Governor Paul Patton

NGA Chairman, 2002-2003

Researchers and educators agree: Children who are well-prepared for their first day of school stand a better chance for success throughout their school career. But how best to prepare children for school depends on whom you ask. Leaders in the early education field have been struggling for years to define "school readiness" and develop accurate ways to demonstrate—or assess—the school readiness of young children. Many policymakers lack a thorough understanding of the complexity of the issue; the implications of developing high-stakes testing for very young children; and the viable solutions to developing, implementing, and measuring effective policy.

Governor Patton has instructed NGA to establish a Task Force on School Readiness. The mandate of the task force will be to study the current views of how to prepare children for school and identify "best practices" for assessing school readiness. The task force will involve governors, policy advisors, educators, and researchers who will oversee the development of an NGA benchmark report designed to raise awareness of the issues, challenges, and opportunities from a policymaker's perspective. The report will also provide specific guidance as to how states should approach and measure school readiness. Leading experts in the field of early childhood assessment and policy will advise the task force, provide recommendations, and give feedback on the task force's final report. That final report also may be used to formulate future NGA policy on school readiness.

By studying the issues related to school readiness and formulating effective policies, NGA will endeavor to help governors prepare America's children for the education of a lifetime.

